

Setanta delivers soccer fix

Irish company serves European sport to pubs, clubs and bars across North America.

BY RIDGE MAHONEY

Can't live without seeing the next showdown of the Old Firm?

Desperate to see every Euro 2004 qualifier that you can?

Loyal to the FA Cup final no matter which teams are in it?

If you fall into any or all of these categories, Setanta Sport will bring you the game you want to see — if at all possible.

Croatians in Canada, Gaelic football fans in New York, and Glasgow Rangers fans anywhere in North America are dependent on Setanta for their regular fix.

Since the mid-1990s, Setanta — an Irish company with offices in San Francisco and production facilities in New York — has been piping in feeds of soccer, rugby and Gaelic sports to pubs and bars and other establishments.

Overseeing it all is Shane O'Rourke, a Liverpool fan who began

The Old Firm rivalry — Rangers vs. Celtic — is one of Setanta's hottest properties.

Setanta's North American operations out of his bedroom and now has "six or seven" co-employees.

Simply put, Setanta buys rights to televised matches and sells and distributes telecasts to outlets wishing to show them. Through trial and error, O'Rourke has learned which games or teams sell better than others.

"Initially, we thought there'd be more Irish [soccer] fans watching games," says O'Rourke, "but having been here in the States awhile, the English games are bigger. It varies on the teams for other games as well. If you get Manchester United and Liverpool in the FA Cup final, it's a very big game, but Chelsea-Middlesbrough isn't.

"We did an Ireland-Croatia friendly and got a lot of calls — from Croatians, mostly. There are a lot of Croatians in Canada, so that's another market."

Setanta either charges a bar a flat fee for a match or sends an employee out to collect an admission fee from

TELEVISION

the customers.

"In [the latter] case the bar gets the game for free, and we just take the door," says O'Rourke.

Setanta lost pay-per-view rights to the English Premier League this year to DirecTV and DISH Network, which he says grossly overpaid — one source said \$250,000 — to Fox Sports International for the product.

It has picked up rights for Champions League games not aired on ESPN2. Response has been lukewarm.

O'Rourke won't say what Setanta pays for games or how many outlets it reaches for its biggest attractions. Dozens of Rangers and Celtic supporters clubs in North America flock to bars to see their teams play, and important England and Ireland internationals can reach 100 outlets.

"We don't give out that number," says O'Rourke. "We can't. I'd put myself out of a job."

"Believe me, if I wasn't paranoid, I wouldn't be in business." ■



JEFF J. MITCHELL/REUTERS